

Beauty industry risks require examination

Oakland Tribune Editorial- August 29, 2006

Risks in beauty industry require examination

THERE'S A beast that lurks in the beauty business in the Bay Area.

Our Aug. 20 report on the beauty industry catalogued the potential hazards from constant use of chemicals by those new immigrants working as manicurists and in beauty salons.

It showed that it is time for the state of California to take a closer look at the health risks related to that line of work.

Staff writer Momo Chang's article noted that toluene, formaldehyde, dibutyl phthalates and other chemical ingredients used as nail polishes, hardeners and glues are on the Proposition 65 list of ingredients that cause cancer and reproductive problems.

Last year, the state approved a law by state Sen. Carole Migden, D-San Francisco, to get cosmetics manufacturers to reveal if any of their ingredients are on the Proposition 65 list. Today, the ingredients remain "trade secrets."

Though customers who go to these shops for manicures and pedicures come into contact with the potentially harmful chemicals infrequently, the workers encounter them constantly.

Eighty percent of these workers in California are now of Vietnamese descent. Many are recent immigrants, and go into the business because it has been made easy for them to get licensed. They attend school for 400 hours, or 2 and ½ — months.

The manicurist licensing test is given only in Vietnamese and English. Thus, the number of those licensed has trebled from 35,000 in 1985 to 105,000 in 2005.

Most workers are said to be unaware of the health risks involved, dismissing concerns because there are no warnings on the bottles pointing out potentially harmful chemicals. Salons in Alameda County and elsewhere in the Bay Area can't be certified as "green" because of the many potentially harmful chemicals used.

Workers frequently complain of chronic health problems such as nose bleeds, infections, skin rashes, headaches, dizziness and difficulty breathing. Though some workers have taken to wearing dust masks, they only screen out large particles and many chemicals still seep through.

It's time to examine the cosmetology and beauty industry and the chemicals commonly used to see what health risks they pose for both customers and, especially, the unwitting work force. The evidence shows great risk in constant exposure to these chemicals.

The industry must list the chemicals used in their products to help identify substances that could cause health problems. In some cases there are alternative chemicals that could be used. Even if they're more expensive, that would be safer. We shouldn't ignore the working conditions and possible health risks their occupations pose to these workers.